

THE DROWNED ARMY

The victory of
THE PROPHET MUSA

عليه السلام

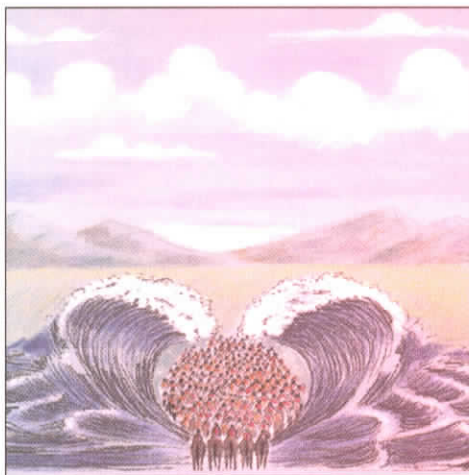


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The Drowned Army

The Story of Prophet Moses
(Peace be upon him)



UK ISLAMIC ACADEMY

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Foreword

In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

The Drowned Army is one of a series of stories on the lives of the great Prophets, upon whom be peace, intended for children of 8 to 12 years. From the moment God created the world He started to reveal His guidance for mankind through His Prophets. These books relate the Prophets' experiences as they struggled to persuade the erring peoples of their day to obey and worship the one and only God. Much that is of relevance today can be learnt from the way these men, specially chosen by God for their task, taught, guided and trained the miscreants.

The Drowned Army, in the English language, has been written for Muslim children growing up in an English-speaking country. This Prophet has been given the name he is known by, in English rather than his original Arabic name to avoid confusion. Parents and teachers, however, should ensure that the traditional Qur'anic name is also known.

Children living in a non-Muslim society are often denied their traditional Islamic family background where stories from the Holy Qur'an were frequently heard. Parents and teachers have a duty to make up for the shortcomings of living outside an Islamic environment. *The Drowned Army* is intended to help them in their task by strengthening children's awareness of the guidance provided by God's Prophets who all bore the same message for mankind: that there is no god but the One, True God.

My thanks are due to Bro. Jamil Qureshi, Sis. Maryam Davies, my daughter Shifa' and my other children for their help in producing this book. May God bless them all and accept this humble effort and make it beneficial to all.

Iqbal Ahmad Azami

1

Tyranny comes to power

The times were long past when the Prophet Joseph (peace and blessings be upon him)* a Canaanite, had ruled in the land of Egypt. He was the master of all the granaries and treasure-houses, and ruled so wisely that the poor as well as the rich had enough to eat. The Egyptians loved him like a father. They welcomed the Israelites with open arms just because they were Joseph's people, believers in the One God. The Israelites settled and prospered in Egypt, and the Egyptians looked up to them because of the simplicity and strictness of their way of life. But when the true religion was explained to the Egyptians, most of them only made excuses. It was hard, they said, to give up the easy style of life they had grown used to. When Joseph died, little remained with them of his teaching. They were full of regrets because God's Messenger was no longer amongst them.

Over the years that followed, the Israelites lost the strength of their belief in the One God. They thought less about the life to come and more about the pleasures of this life. They slipped into the habits and luxuries of the wealthy Egyptians who started to look down on them and say: 'These Israelites are only

*Muslims are required to invoke Allah's blessings and peace upon the Prophets whenever their names are mentioned.

foreigners who have somehow set themselves up in our land. They're using us, living off us.' Very soon, the Egyptians started to hate the Israelites and, little by little, pushed them out of positions of power in the land. They were then forced to work for the Egyptians to make a modest living.

An especially high and mighty man became powerful among the Egyptians. He was young and energetic, and loved to plot and organize. He organized victories for himself over all his rivals among his own people and became king. Then, in a series of well-planned battles, he beat his enemies among the neighbouring peoples of the Nile valley. After he beat them, he made them pay high taxes. He surrounded himself with other good organizers who improved his army which won even more battles, which brought more taxes. He became more powerful still. His people, proud of being winners, liked him and gave him grand titles, such as all-mighty conqueror, ruler of the Nile and bright star of Egypt. The king became used to this nonsense and started to believe it. He called himself Pharaoh and persuaded his people that he was really a god in the disguise of a man. To prove it to everybody he insisted that people worship him. Statues were made, ceremonies were invented, buildings were put up to keep the statues in and stage the ceremonies.

Pharaoh was well-pleased with things. This worship of himself, he observed, helped keep the common people in fear and awe, it even helped to unify them as 'his'

people. That made the job of governing them much easier. He went a step further by cutting himself off from them. Whenever he went out, he looked down on them from a chariot or a horse. He never walked amongst them or spoke to them directly. He had a huge palace built to fit around huge doors so that he could disappear from sight whilst still on horseback. Since government work took him to different parts of his kingdom, he had other, smaller palaces built up and down the Nile, with secluded, walled gardens. He filled these palaces with treasures of gold and other things considered precious, and soldiers to guard the treasures.

2

The Israelites are punished

Certain people in Pharaoh's kingdom were not willing to bow down to him as if to God. They were not rich or powerful, but the commonest of workers in his towns and villages. These were the Israelites, weak and leaderless, but still the family of Joseph, and Jacob, Isaac and Abraham, believers in the One God. It occurred to Pharaoh to kill the whole lot of them. But he was too shrewd to do that. If they preferred to die rather than accept him as a god, others might begin to doubt him as well. He realized that all his power could not change their hearts and minds. But he did not understand at all what that meant.

Pharaoh loved the power he enjoyed over the Egyptians and did not want to have that power lessened in any way. He knew in his heart that he himself believed in nothing at all except power. Not just simple, brute power, but power properly organized. He went over in his mind the extent of that power. First and foremost, there was his army, the pride of his heart: soldiers, bowmen, horsemen, charioteers, properly trained, regularly paid, armed and uniformed, under sergeants and captains loyal and obedient to himself. Then, there was his other army, his civil servants: to count and

collect taxes, to plot the stars and work out exact calendars, to plan and oversee irrigation, seeding and harvesting. Under them, there were still other officials, gathering and delivering goods and services, throughout his domain, all bound together in his name and for his sake. Who dared deny the strength of his army or the depth of his control of the fertile lands of the Nile, and of all the trade that came by that great river? Pharaoh smiled with the joy and confidence of his position.

He summoned all his councillors and generals, and when they were gathered, he announced solemnly: 'I am your lord most high.' Then, very matter-of-fact, he asked: 'I should like to know who doubts this?'

All bowed dutifully. Then one said: 'The whole world knows that mighty Pharaoh is the lord most high. Only the Israelites deny it.'

Pharaoh smiled, but uttered cruelly: 'That I already knew, but only a tyrant would expect good sense from his livestock!'

Certain of the king's councillors understood exactly what this meant. They withdrew quietly and began writing for Pharaoh the new law of the land: henceforth, the Israelites were not to be regarded as people. The king of Egypt did not recognize them as his subjects because they did not have the sense to recognize him as their 'lord most high'.

Pharaoh was very organized in this new act of cruelty. He arranged and established the hatred of his people for the Israelites. All the Israelites without exception, men, women and children, were classed as work-animals, and settled in encampments at a distance from the dwellings of the Egyptians. The women and younger children were forced to be household servants for the Egyptians: they would leave in the darkness to go home to sleep, then return at dawn to begin their tasks. As for the men, most were marched off to begin work on Pharaoh's many building projects; their overseers and taskmasters, ordered by Pharaoh to treat them as animals, did so pitilessly.



3

The tyrant goes mad

Pharaoh observed that his own people were more united than before. When they saw how the Israelites were treated for not recognizing Pharaoh as a god, it made them feel that being Egyptian was somehow special. Also they were all the more keen to recognize Pharaoh as a god. The few Egyptians who, like the Israelites, believed in the One God, did so in fear and hiding. But Pharaoh was not worried about them. He thought himself a strong and clear-sighted man who alone understood the reality of things: that a wilful, powerful, organizing man could live and act as if a god, otherwise there was nothing to believe in. Pharaoh did not believe in conscience, in good and evil, in the Reckoning and the Judgement. He believed only in himself. Sometimes he wanted to tell his people this 'truth', but it was more convenient if they carried on believing that he was their 'lord most high'. He often felt like laughing at his subjects and sometimes did so.

But after a time Pharaoh decided he had to share his secret. He therefore picked out for himself a man he could confide in. The man he chose was called Haman, a lover of treasures as well as power. Under his influence Pharaoh also fell in love with his treasures. He began to spend many hours all alone looking at them and touching them. Slowly, without realizing it

himself, he started to go mad. Those who saw his odd ways supposed it must all be a part of his greatness, and said nothing about it.

In his madness Pharaoh decided that he was too important a person to disappear from the world. He convinced himself that by the time he died, he would have thought out some means of carrying on in a different sort of way. The cleverest people in his kingdom were taken from a useful study of God's creation to work on some formula for preserving skin and bone after death.

Then Pharaoh decided he would like his treasures with him. 'I deserve to have them for ever,' he announced. He had plans drawn up for a mighty tomb, to be built in such a way that it could never fall down and, once sealed with him inside, could never be opened. Nobody dared tell Pharaoh that this monstrous tomb would take so long, he would never see it finished.

4

A killer of children

Pharaoh lived at ease with himself until, one day, an Egyptian priest informed him of a certain prophecy. The prophecy was that a son was soon to be born among the Israelites who would destroy Pharaoh and his kingdom. Pharaoh thanked the man for the information and then had him imprisoned. He explained to his court that the prophecy was a piece of nonsense put out by the Israelites to insult him. Then, in a matter-of-fact way, he ordered that every boy born to the Israelites be put to death. He added: 'Perhaps they will never learn who their lord and master really is. But it is my duty to try and teach them.'

The first the Israelites knew of this terror was when Pharaoh's guards were at their doors. The guards had been given detailed instructions and thorough training for their mission. They looked in every corner of every hut and yard, in every box and basket, in every bundle of clothes. If they found a baby and it was male, they killed it on the spot. Mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, cousins, neighbours, begged for mercy. They screamed for pity. But neither mercy nor pity was shown them.

The day of a son's birth, once a day of pride and joy, for celebrating and telling everybody the good news, became among the Israelites a day for hiding, for

sorrow and consoling one another. Thus Pharaoh, in his desperation to believe that a man can be as a god, turned simple, normal happiness into gruesome horror. He turned his guards, who were also fathers, brothers, cousins, into heartless butchers able to believe that they were not killing innocents but ridding their land of vermin.

Every Israelite household lived in fear of the grinding steps of those butchers and then their door being pushed in. So it was in the house of 'Imran after his son, Moses (Musa, peace and blessings be upon him), was born. Aaron, a few years older than Moses, and their sister, older than both, and their mother, spent anxious days and nights praying to God to deliver them.

5

God's promise is true

God revealed to the mother what she must do to save her baby. He inspired in her heart the idea of putting the baby in a box and floating it down the Nile, an ark of hope for the believers. God promised to restore her son to her and, in time to come, make him His Messenger.

Though it was hard for the mother, she put her baby in a wooden box, carried it to the river's edge and lowered it into the water. The box nestled among reeds, not floating away but rocking gently near her hand, and the mother sobbed and wept. It was not fear of Pharaoh's guards but her trust in God's promise that finally gave her the courage she needed. Placing both hands on the box, she pushed it gently into the current, believing and praying. The water carried it away just as gently, comforting her, and she watched until it was out of sight. God put such love in the mother's heart that she sent Moses' sister running along the river bank to see where the box would go. Indeed, the following day, except that God strengthened her, she would have revealed what she had done. But, as it was, she held to her trust in God's promise.

The box moved exactly as God willed, down the Nile, and into the channel that an arrogant man had had dug to ornament his private garden. Moses' sister



followed, taking care not to be seen. But after the box dipped under the garden wall, she could see it no longer. It bobbed up again and was visible only when it floated past a pavilion on the water's edge. The first to notice it was the Queen of Egypt, Pharaoh's wife, who commanded her servants to bring the box to her. As soon as she set eyes on the baby, her heart filled with love, and she held him close to her. All the servants gathered round and asked to hold the child.

Pharaoh, with Haman and other councillors, came to see what was happening. The king knew at once that his queen wanted to keep the baby. A councillor said: 'It must be an Israelite baby.' Then, unsure of Pharaoh's mood, he asked cautiously: 'Will it be put to death?' The queen answered the man sharply: 'Does all-conquering Pharaoh need to kill babies!' Then she spoke privately with her husband and said: 'He will be a comfort to me and you! Do not kill him. Perhaps he will bring us good or we may adopt him as a son.'

Pharaoh wanted to please his queen. However, face to face with a baby, like the hundreds he had had slaughtered, he wanted to be sure he was not being soft-hearted. He looked at the boy, was convinced of his innocence, and decided that, yes, he could quite easily give the order to kill him, if it was necessary. But it did not seem to be necessary: 'Am I not all-powerful? Besides, if the boy is brought up under our care and protection, he will be one of us. Why should I fear him?'

Anxious to please the king, Haman and the others said admiring things about the baby and praised the great generosity of Pharaoh. They even dared to say that Pharaoh had let the baby live, that Pharaoh had 'given' the baby life. In this way, that mighty ruler and all his wise men picked out for themselves the means of their own destruction. How great was their error! They had no more understanding than the merchants who pulled Joseph out of the well and then sold him for a handful of coins in the Egyptian market-place, ignorant of his worth.

Great excitement and activity surrounded the new arrival. The guards, the servants, their families, all spoke of nothing else. Then, suddenly, the mood changed. The baby cried with hunger but he would not accept any of the milk that was offered. The queen sent to many houses, both near and far, for a nurse to feed and foster the baby. But one after another Moses refused their milk. The queen's joy turned to sorrow as the baby grew weaker. As the news spread through the town and beyond, many women called hoping to feed the baby and so earn a reward. All failed and were turned away.

A young girl then told the palace servants she knew of a woman whose milk no baby would ever refuse, not even this one. Brought before the queen, the girl was respectful but unafraid, and repeated her claim. The queen was desperate to save the baby's life, ready to try anyone, even an Israelite.

The girl, Moses' sister, then brought with her the baby's mother. When the baby was given to the mother, crying and weak with hunger, she prayed to God for patience and control. Her face did not show her special love for her own child, nor her distress at his condition. She took him quietly and fed him. To the amazement of everyone except those who knew, Moses accepted his mother's milk. If the thought crossed the queen's mind that this woman might be the boy's real mother, she kept it to herself. She could measure the woman's love for the baby by her own. Pharaoh was only told that a suitable nurse had at last been found. The queen paid Moses' mother generously and sent the baby with her to look after.

Thus, God's promise to Moses' mother was fulfilled, her son was restored to her and her trust in God rewarded. God's promise, concerning the trials of life and its rewards is likewise wholly true, but most people do not know that this is so, or do not hold firmly to their belief in it.

6

Moses escapes from the tyrant

Moses was returned to Pharaoh's palace after he no longer needed his mother's milk. He grew up there like a prince. Unlike the common people of Egypt, unlike the Israelites, he saw the king from close up and came to manhood without awe or fear of the ways of the rich and powerful. He knew very well how they get their wealth and how they keep their power. He grew up with a longing for justice and a passion against injustice. God kept his heart pure of the corrupting luxuries of palace life. Inside the palace he saw daily the terrible waste of goods and provisions that was possible only because of the terrible want and misery outside the palace. Above all, Moses was conscious of the suffering and humiliation of his own people, the Israelites, whom Pharaoh still kept and treated like work-animals.

It was a period of inward training for the man who, as God had decreed, would liberate his people and destroy Pharaoh. God endowed him with wisdom and knowledge from Himself so that he could recognize the arrogance of Pharaoh and yet endure, with a steady hope, until God showed the way to bring down that arrogance.

One day, while walking in a quiet part of the city, Moses came upon two men fighting. One was an Israelite from his own people, the other was an Egyptian, a man from among his enemies. The Israelite called to Moses to help him. Moses answered the plea by striking the Egyptian a hard blow. The blow was so hard it killed the man outright. The Israelite fled in panic. Moses immediately realized the seriousness of his hasty action, and turned to God, repenting: 'This is satan's doing. My Lord, I have wronged my soul. Forgive me!' The All-Forgiving, the All-Compassionate forgave him, and Moses acknowledged it: 'My Lord, as You have blessed me, I will never lend support to wrong-doers again.'

Soon guards were about in the city, asking questions, trying to find the man who had killed their fellow-countryman. Moses avoided them since, if questioned, he could only tell the truth. But with Pharaoh's guards, the truth would not help him: they would not take into account the fact that he had not meant to kill the man.

The very next day Moses came upon the same Israelite again fighting with an Egyptian. The shameless man again asked him to help. Moses realized the man was a trouble-maker and said so. Nevertheless he stepped forward to pull the Egyptian off him. The Israelite, hearing himself accused, was afraid that Moses was about to strike him. He blurted out: 'What, Moses! Are you going to strike me dead as you did the Egyptian yesterday?' Then, for no reason, he began to abuse

the very man who the day before had helped him: 'I see that your intention is to become a powerful man in the land. You are not one of those who put things right!'

The Egyptian then fled and, as soon as he could, informed the guards. Moses was then a wanted man. His life depended on avoiding capture. He had known before how others moved in fear of Pharaoh's guards, but he now lived that fear, dodging here and there, and praying all the while for God to deliver him. An Egyptian who had come running from the other side of the city, a man who was in secret a believer, caught up with Moses. He told Moses how Pharaoh had met in council with his most senior advisers and determined that no effort would be spared to capture him. Moses knew how well organized Pharaoh's spies and armies were. The believer said to him: 'Flee this kingdom! I am a sincere adviser to you.'

The spacious land of Egypt in which Moses had lived like a prince, and where he was well-known, was suddenly too small a place to hide in. But he knew no other land, no other people. Where could he turn? Where could he place his hope for deliverance for himself and his people? What now of his longing for justice, and his anger against injustice? Never had his need for God's help and guidance so pressed his heart as it did now. He prayed with such a depth of understanding and devotion that his skin shivered. As he prayed, the idea came to him to go to Midian.

Midian was a desert country, peopled by a few Arab nomads. It bordered Egypt but Pharaoh had not bothered to conquer it because, he said, its people were too wild and too poor, its land too barren, to make conquest worthwhile. In Midian the people were believers. Moses therefore had some hope of being safe there, of not being betrayed into the tyrant's power. But how would he live? Would the people really be willing to welcome him if they knew his story? Would he even know which way to take through the few, scattered settlements of that dry waste? Moses accepted in his heart that no one has a sure way in this world unless God directs them to it. So he set out, vigilant and fearful of being followed, praying for guidance in Midian.

7

Refuge in Midian

In Midian, Moses' steps were guided towards a well where groups of men were gathered to draw water for their sheep and goats. As he came nearer, Moses saw two young women, apart from the others, struggling to hold their sheep back from the water. Speaking with courtesy and, since he was a stranger, without staring at them, Moses asked: 'Why don't you draw water for your animals as the others are doing?'

'We must wait for the others to finish,' answered one of the women. 'We are weak and they are strong. Our father is an old man.'

There was no bitterness nor complaint in her voice. Moses was so moved by the women's patience and strength of mind, he desired to help them. He stepped forward to the well with a natural authority and, turn by turn with the other men, he drew water for the young women.

When all had finished, Moses single-handedly slid back the massive slab of stone that covered the mouth of the well. The women thanked him and left with their flock. All the people and all the animals went homeward and the land emptied. Moses stayed by the well. Indeed, he had nowhere to go. Soon the declining day would leave him wrapped in cold

darkness with nothing to see except distant stars. Moses felt keenly his human loneliness and frailty. Aware of hardship and solitude, aware of the strength God grants certain of His slaves to carry hardship without complaint, Moses turned amid the lengthening shadows, away from the well, away from the diverse tracks now barely visible, away from the incoming night, and prayed: 'My Lord, I have need of whatever good You send down on me.'

Before night had fallen, one of the young women returned and said to Moses: 'Our father invites you to our house, to thank you for drawing water for us.' Moses thanked her and, as she indicated the way, walked ahead. As he was still a stranger, she might have felt uneasy if he had walked behind. The woman noted his thoughtful good manners, as earlier she had noted his strength, but said nothing.

Her father praised God when he saw Moses and welcomed him to his home with simple grace. When his guest had eaten and rested, the old man asked him who he was and how he came there. He listened patiently to Moses' story and was moved by his account of the sufferings of the believers in Egypt, the Israelites. He had already heard something of Pharaoh's cruelty. He said: 'Do not fear. You have escaped from the unjust people.'

Moses felt safe, thanked God, and slept peacefully.

8

A new home and family

One of the old man's daughters suggested that he hire Moses to work for him. She had witnessed in his good manners and in the way he had moved the stone-lid of the well, that Moses was both strong and trustworthy. But the old man had a deeper understanding of the situation. He had weighed the matter carefully and knew better what the needs were of everybody involved. He was quite certain that Moses was a man to trust and be open with.

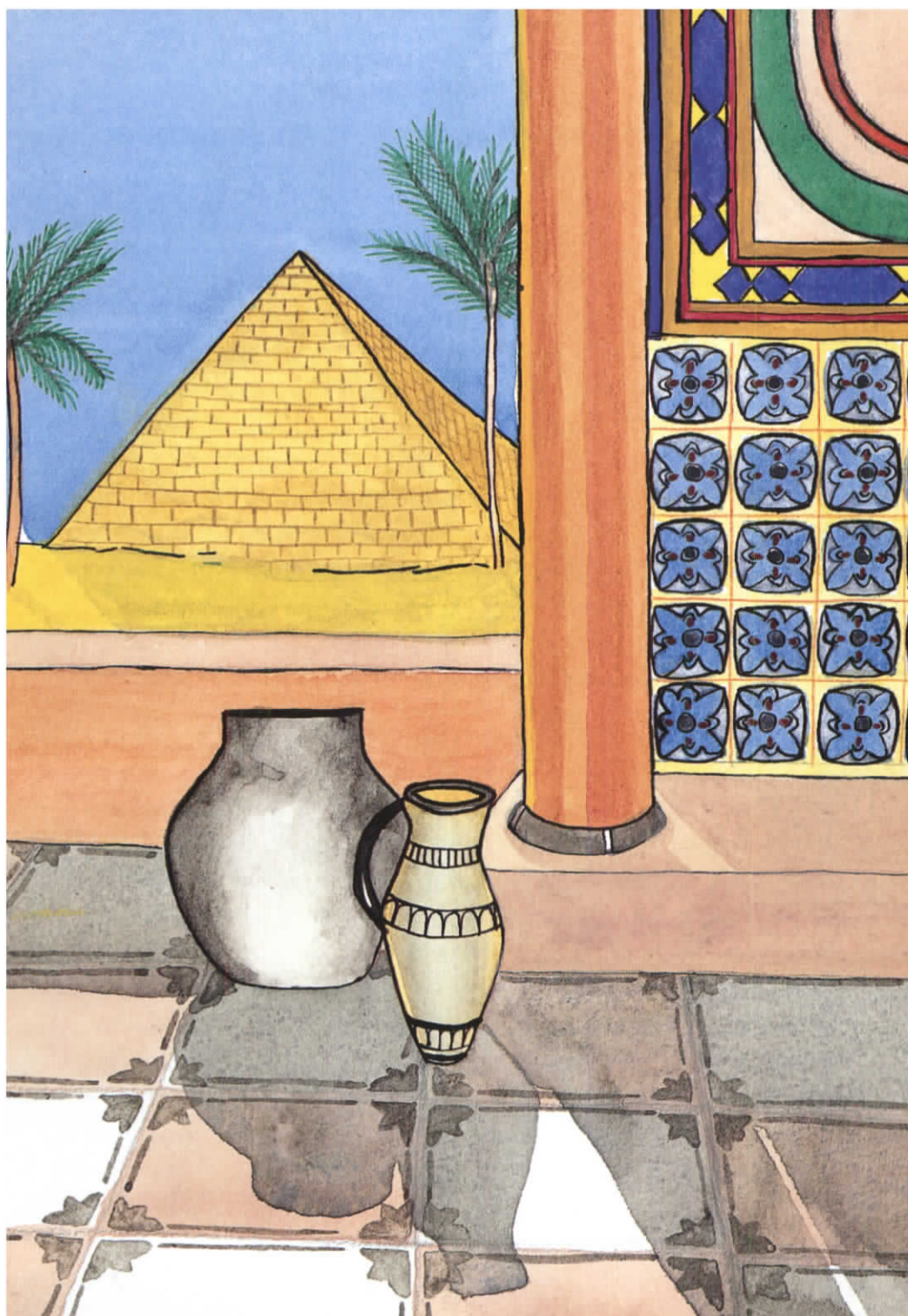
The old man spoke his mind plainly: 'I would like you to marry one of my daughters, provided you will work for me for eight years.' After a pause, he added: 'Though you may work ten, if you think it better. I do not wish to press you hard.'

Moses reflected. He felt that this opportunity was from God and God would bless him in it. Had God not guided him thus far? To the meeting at the well, to this kindly old man? He accepted the offer, leaving himself the choice to work eight or the full ten years, and he named God as the witness to their agreement.

During the years that passed Moses looked back on the life he had escaped. He was now far from Pharaoh's power and from his palaces. There he had

walked in the tyrant's great halls with servants or soldiers at every door. There he had seen many costly objects, of heavy, handsome furniture, plush cloths and furnishings. There he had seen elaborate banquets, served daily with loud and shameless ceremony. Yet, as God willed, such things had not corrupted him. Moses was never able, as the wealthy men and women of Pharaoh's court were, to pretend that the servants were 'not there'. He always remembered those who sweated to fetch and carry, to cook and present, all that the rich consumed so wastefully. He remembered the thousands who, beyond the palace walls, laboured to grow or to make or to build in order to meet demands that were never satisfied. He remembered even now the suffering and needs of the poor, and how his passion for justice had filled him with anger.

He thanked God for his escape from the selfishness of Pharaoh's court. In Midian he breathed the clearer air of freedom and of supporting himself, to the extent God willed, by his own effort. He took manfully to the strict vigour of long days, moving with the flocks in quest of pasture, to the careful weighing of everything since everything was scarce and therefore precious. He reflected on the beauty he found in his new life. A beauty not of individual, separate things, as in Pharaoh's world of power, but a beauty in the whole pattern of living which could not, and would not, waste a drop of water or a blade of grass. There was beauty too in the straightforward manners of the people of



Midian, a people accustomed to self-dependence and self-rule, to a general feeling of rough equality for all under God. Moses was thankful also for every living thing and filled with wonder at the majesty of God's creation. These years of labour amid the quiet solemnity of the land, strengthened not only his body, but also his meditation and devotion. He learnt a deep patience and humility.

In his prayers Moses never forgot the continuing suffering of his people, the Israelites. He would often ask himself: When will they be free? Then he would ask: And if they are free, what life will they choose, what life do they dream of, what kind of civilization will they build if God gives them authority in the land?

As Moses' submission to God deepened, so his longing to know how to serve God deepened also. As the years of his agreement with the old man passed, he established a family. Then, according to the urging of his heart which he had fully surrendered to God, he took his leave of the old man. The old man said his farewells and commended them to God's care.

9

God's command

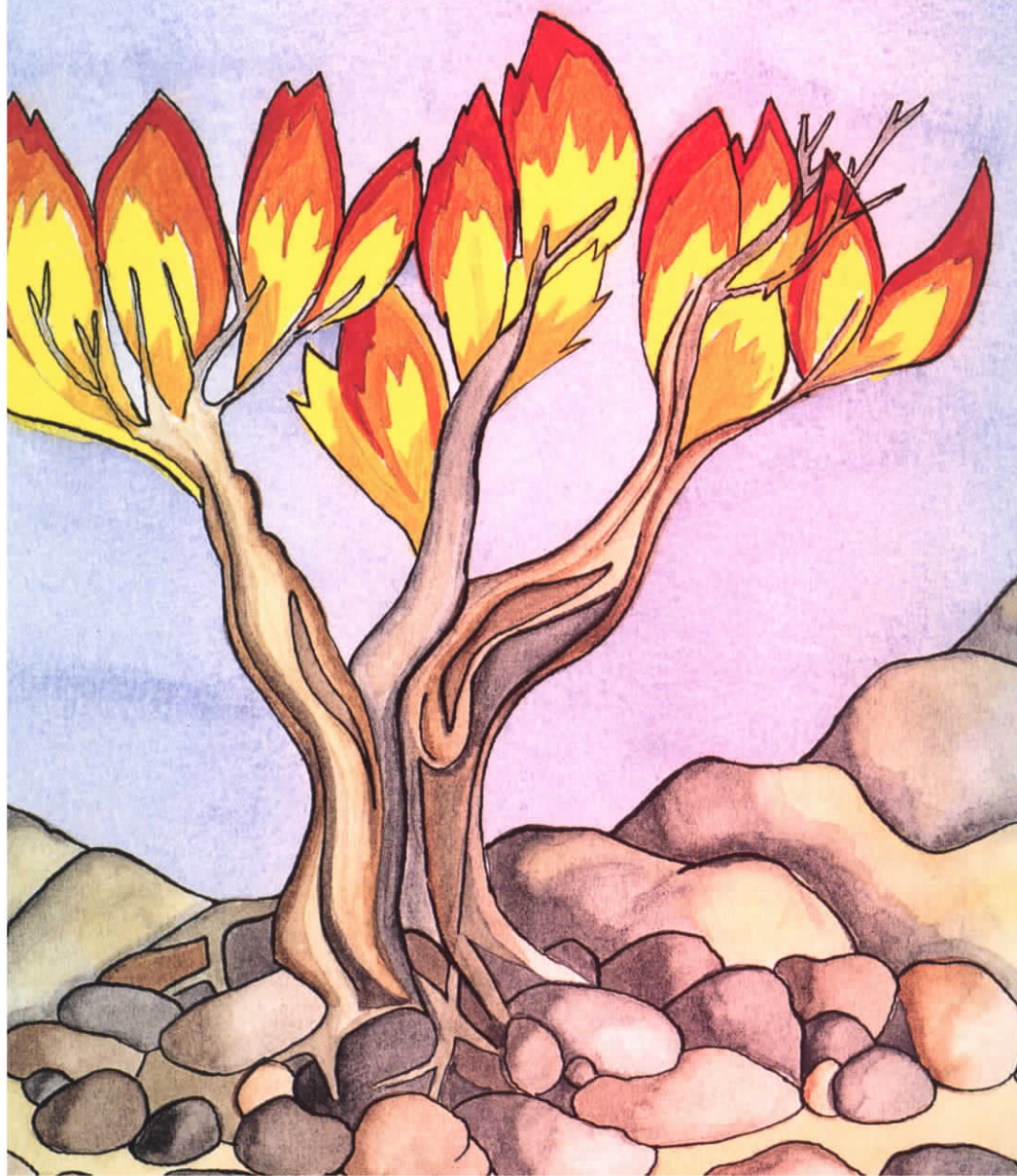
Moses and his family were heading towards Egypt through the desert which lies between Midian and Egypt. They were near to Mount Sinai, the night was dark and cold. In the distance Moses saw a fire and said to his family: 'Wait here. Perhaps I will bring back with me a torch from the fire, or perhaps I will find some guidance at the fire.'

As he approached the fire, a voice called out to him from a tree on the right side of the valley: 'Moses, I am your Lord. Remove your shoes. You are in the holy valley of Tuwa.'

Moses did so and approached nearer. Then God said to him: 'I have chosen you, so listen attentively to this revelation. I am God. There is no god but Me, so worship Me and perform the prayer for My remembrance. The Hour is coming. I conceal the Hour so that every soul can work for its reward. Do not let any of those who, following their own fancies, disbelieve in the Hour, prevent you from it, or your soul will perish.

'What is in your right hand, Moses?'

Moses answered: 'It is my staff.' Moses had learnt humility and gratitude for every little thing, so he



added, to express his thankfulness as best he could: 'I lean upon it and I use it to beat down leaves to feed my sheep, and I have other uses for it.'

God said: 'Moses, throw it down.'

Moses did so and the staff changed into a slithering snake.

God said: 'Take it again and do not be afraid. We will return it to its original form.'

Then God granted Moses another sign. He told him to clasp his hand to his bosom. When he withdrew his hand, it blazed with pure light. God commanded Moses to go with these signs to Pharaoh's people, and there proclaim the true faith and demand the release of the Israelites.

Moses said that the Egyptians would certainly deny him and abuse him, that his feelings would become jumbled, the words muddled on his tongue, and he would be then unable to convey the Message. Besides, he had been responsible for the death of one of them, and he was afraid they would kill him. Moses therefore asked to have his brother, Aaron, a good speaker, to support him.

God said: 'We will support you through your brother. And we will confer such authority on you, that, because of Our signs they will not touch you. You, and whoever goes your way, will be victorious.'

Thus, the All-Mighty strengthened Moses' resolve to carry the Message. He also told Moses how every twist and turn of his life so far had been arranged and decreed for this purpose. Then God said: 'Go, you and your brother, with My signs, and never forget to remember Me. Go to Pharaoh who has become impudent. But speak gently to him. Perhaps he may listen to the warning and become fearful.'

10

Pharaoh organizes his battle-plan

As the years passed, Pharaoh had grown more impudent. He clung more frantically to his treasures and thought himself a collector of most refined taste. His face had wrinkled with old age and he did not like it. He took to wearing a gold mask, in the form of his own face when young, built into an elaborate crown. He had as many of his precious stones as possible sewn into the garments he wore in public. He looked altogether like a statue of himself, and even walked stiffly to exaggerate the effect. Though he thought himself an uncommonly great and gifted man, he was really a common idol-worshipper who worshipped himself.

Moses also had changed. Nevertheless, he was recognized the moment he entered the kingdom of Egypt. The guards still had orders to seize and execute him. Moses told them he had come as a Messenger from his Lord Most High, with clear signs from Him, and a warning for all the people of Egypt. There was such a depth of faith and compassion in Moses' voice and bearing, that the guards could not act. They rushed away to inform their superiors, who informed theirs, and so on, until a wave of excitement and wonder

had all but swept the kingdom before Pharaoh heard of Moses' return. God's Messenger meanwhile went openly to join his brother and his people, to hearten them with the news he had for them.

Councillors came to Pharaoh, trembling, expecting to be hanged for being the first to directly mention to him the return of Moses. But they found Pharaoh, behind his gold mask, in cheerful mood. 'Do not be alarmed,' he assured them, 'I have been expecting him.'

Pharaoh thought himself well-prepared. He knew the history of his people, knew about Joseph, also a Messenger of God, and the respect he had commanded. Pharaoh was a shrewd manager of men and he now calculated that his people would dither again as they had dithered in Joseph's time. The believers in hiding would be heartened. Together with the ditherers they might threaten his power. No, it was already too late simply to get rid of Moses and the Israelites. So he organized and plotted, just as he used to plot and organize his battle campaigns. The aim of this particular battle was not a river-bank, nor a hill, nor a trade-route, nor a market-place. The aim was to discredit the Messenger and the Message, to demonstrate once and for all his own superiority.

First: Moses claimed that he was God's Messenger, a holy man, a man of truth. That could be answered by calling him a murderer and an ingrate, facts well known.

Second: Moses believed in the One God. Ah, thought Pharaoh, but my people still cling to their ancestors' gods and idols: they will not stand for any abuse of what their fathers and forefathers believed.

Third: Moses had come with signs, proofs. What can these be? Tricks and illusions to deceive the foolish? I have scientists and sorcerers to uncover or outdo them; they are even now making ready. A public humiliation for Moses, that is what will undo my enemy!

Fourth: Moses had not come with an army. And I still have my army and a beautiful army it is, with loyal captains. If Moses threatens me directly, I will have him killed for trying to steal the kingdom from the Egyptian people. If he does not threaten me directly, I can say that he plans to do so. I will turn my people against the Israelites. If the Israelites give in and accept me as their lord, they have lost. If they resist and either run or fight, my people and my army will crush them. There is no way I can lose!

Pharaoh looked forward to the day of confrontation. His people caught the mood of confidence and spoke with pride of their king.

11

The confrontation

Moses and Aaron stood unbowed in the tyrant's palace. Pharaoh was seated on his elegant throne and dressed, as was now his custom, in jewelled robes and his gold mask. He said:

'You stand before me, Moses, unbowed, claiming to be what you claim. Are you so shameless? You whom we rescued from the water, and fed and fostered in our house, to whom we gave everything, and showed every favour? And then, thankless as you are, you did the deed you did and fled like a common criminal?'

Pharaoh expected Moses to make excuses, to mince words, and thereby forfeit the dignity and clear speech of a Prophet. But he did not. He said:

'Indeed I did it then, for at that time I was one of those who go astray. So I fled from you in fear. But my Lord gave me judgement and understanding and He has made me His Messenger.

'You reproach me because you gathered me from the water; you who enslaved my people and abased them cruelly, butchering their sons and sparing their daughters. But for your commanding that evil, I would never have been cast in the water for your people to find. How then can you reproach me or claim to be my rescuer?'

As Pharaoh did not believe in good and evil, he was not ashamed of what he had done. He changed the subject and said: 'Tell us, what is the Lord of all the worlds?'

Moses said: 'The Lord of the heavens and the earth and what is between them, if you have certainty.'

Pharaoh turned to his councillors. He wanted to be sure they picked up the meaning of what Moses said; namely, that all the gods and idols the Egyptians believed in, the gods of rain, of thunder, of harvest, of light and dark, sun and moon, and the like, all these were false. 'Do you not hear?' said Pharaoh to them. 'Do you not hear?'

Moses resumed: 'Your Lord and the Lord of your fathers, the ancients.'

Pharaoh was confident that the argument was going as he had expected. Moses was clearly saying that the fathers and grandfathers of the Egyptians present had gone astray from the truth; only the ancients, the generations of long ago, had believed in the Lord of all being. Pharaoh prompted his councillors: 'This Messenger who has been sent to you is surely mad!'

Moses went on: 'The Lord of the east and the west and what is between them, if you have understanding.'

Having already alerted his people, Pharaoh asked, indicating the councillors around him: 'And what of the generations before these?'

Moses remembered that God had warned him to speak gently to the unbelievers. He neither wished nor needed to insult their parents. He said: 'The knowledge of them is with my Lord in a Book. My Lord does not err, nor forget.'

Instead of being insulted, Pharaoh's people were, as Pharaoh clearly saw in their faces, consoled. Whatever their fathers had earned, God would judge them as He alone can judge, forgetting not the least atom of good, nor the least atom of evil. Pharaoh, behind his gold mask, was very troubled. Nevertheless he collected himself to deliver the speech he had prepared:

'I, Pharaoh, am your Lord. Who has provided for you fame and glory among all the nations of the world? Who has given you victory on the battlefield? Who has founded cities for you, and market-places teeming with goods? Who has made a desert land green for you with canals that run straight and true? Who has linked your settlements for you by means of firm and guarded roads, with watering places for yourselves and your animals? Who is your security against your enemies? Who gives you sound sleep and prosperity in your generation and in the generations to come?'

The councillors, the rich and powerful of the land, being well-practised at forgetting the evil of Pharaoh's government, were impressed and loyally hailed Pharaoh as their lord. But God's Messenger told them:

'Our Lord is He who created for everything its life and form and then guided it; who commanded the earth

as a cradle for you, and threaded in it pathways for your coming and going, and sent down rain out of heaven and brought forth innumerable varieties of plants. How otherwise do you eat, and pasture your animals? My Lord says: "Out of the earth We created you, and shall restore you into it and a second time bring you out of it!"

The truth of what Moses told the councillors did not reach to Pharaoh's heart. The sense of his own failure did. In sudden anger he said: 'If you take a god other than me, I shall have you imprisoned!'

'What, even if we bring you a clear proof?' asked Moses.

Pharaoh said tauntingly: 'Bring your proof then, if you are truthful.'

Moses threw down his staff and it became a snake. He drew forth his hand and it blazed with light. The councillors were amazed, for they had never seen the like of this. Pharaoh, as God willed, believed that he saw only the conjuring and illusions familiar to him. Perhaps God had granted Moses these particular signs so that Pharaoh should make the mistake that he made. The tyrant said with mocking approval: 'This man is a cunning sorcerer!' He exchanged looks with Haman who led a group of them in accusing Moses: 'The man is obviously a sorcerer!'

Moses was appalled by their failure to distinguish the handiwork of God from the craft of men, to distinguish

truth from the illusions of sorcerers. But they were heedless in their impudence and said: 'We do not believe you.'

Pharaoh was quick to seize this moment of advantage, as he thought, and issued the challenge he had all along intended: 'Have you come here, Moses, to drive us out of our land with your sorcery? Without doubt we will show you the equal of what you have. So fix a time and place between yourself and us. We shall not miss it, nor shall you.'

Moses fixed the time for noon on the Day of the Festival. The great square outside the king's palace was to be the arena for the contest. Pharaoh then left the assembly. As he did so, Haman slipped out and alerted the king's best sorcerers and scientists. Moses addressed those who remained: 'Be warned. Do not fabricate against God lest He strike you down with a terrible punishment. Whoever fabricates a lie has failed altogether.'

12

The victory of Truth

All the kingdom's sorcerers gathered in response to Pharaoh's proclamation and were promised a reward if they were the victors.

On the appointed day, the people gathered in the great square and waited. Pharaoh and his queen arrived and were carried up to the high podium that had been especially set up. From there Pharaoh looked down upon his subjects, confident behind the gold mask that he would soon be celebrating the defeat of Moses. He had already ordered that Moses and Aaron should be executed after his victory: it would be done while their own people watched; for Pharaoh had allowed the Israelites to gather also, so anxious was he that they should witness the humiliation of their leader.

Pharaoh gave a signal and Haman led out the sorcerers. Dressed in brilliantly coloured robes with long, flowing sleeves, they trooped into the square, each with an assistant carrying before them mysterious little boxes and other apparatus. Pharaoh signalled again and the sorcerers began their tricks. Coloured flashes and bangs and strange zig-zagging lights zoomed about the square. Some of the sorcerers put their hands into their sleeves and when they drew them out again, and held them aloft, the crowd saw them glow with

coloured light, though only for a moment or two. It was an impressive show. Pharaoh was proud of his chemists and his conjurers and their technical wizardry, which, as he well knew, was all it was. But his people did not know, and were proud of their Pharaoh and hailed him with long whoops and howls of approval. The Israelites did not know, and they fell silent. They thought: If we win we shall be punished. If we lose we shall be punished.

Pharaoh then ordered Moses out to the middle of the square, where the sorcerers made a space for him.

God's Messenger stepped out from among his people and stood, the centre of attention, neither moving nor speaking.

'Will you throw first,' asked the sorcerers boldly, 'or shall we?'

'Throw!' said Moses.

Then the sorcerers plunged their hands into their sleeves, one after another, and drew out sticks and braided ropes and plaited scarves, and threw them, one after the other, into the air. As these swirled in the air and came down, the sticks and ropes and scarves seemed to hiss and slide and slither like snakes. Again and again they threw, and there were snakes, it seemed, everywhere. 'Snakes! snakes! snakes!' cried the amazed people, believing that they indeed saw snakes. And those who were behind and could see

nothing believed they saw what the others believed they saw, and they too cried: 'Snakes! snakes! snakes!'

Moses held his staff above his head and for a moment his hand trembled. Moses was afraid. Afraid that, because of some weakness in him, his people would be shamed, that the tyrant would be the victor, that falsehood would win the day, that he would prove himself unworthy of God's purpose. But God assured Moses: 'Do not fear. Without doubt you are the victor. Throw down what you hold in your right hand, and it will eat up all that they have managed. For they have managed only the tricks of sorcerers, and sorcerers do not prosper ever.'

So Moses cast down his staff, and the people saw that it was a snake, that ate up the snakes or ropes or sticks or scarves or whatever lying invention the sorcerers had made. One by one their illusions disappeared. There was no shouting, no cheering, no clapping. The whole square fell silent.

The sorcerers understood the truth of Moses' signs from God. The All-Mighty has created an infinite number of existences, visible to us and invisible to us, living and not living, some with sense and feeling, others without, on the earth and beneath it, in the sea and under it, in the air and beyond it, and He alone knows the limits and relations, the provision and purpose, of each and every thing that He has made. As for man, he does not know the beginning and end of even his

own life, he does not even know the true weight and consequences of his own actions. Who but a fool would pit the power of man, however capable, and he is capable only as God wills, against the power of God? Pharaoh was just such a fool, and his authority over the hearts and minds of the sorcerers crumbled and fell away. They threw themselves to the ground and cried out: 'We believe in the Lord of Aaron and Moses.'

Pharaoh sprang up in a blind rage, humiliated and embittered. Unthinking, he tore off his gold mask, and disclosed a face sweating and swollen with anger. 'No!' he bellowed at them. 'Have you believed before I gave you permission! You are of his party, he is your leader, the very one who taught you your sorcery!' In the moment of his defeat Pharaoh did not turn to the truth but to a lie for, as most of his councillors knew, he had himself arranged this whole show. Still unthinking, he threatened: 'I shall certainly cut off your hands and feet alternately, and crucify you on the trunks of palm-trees. You will find out for sure whose punishment is more terrible and more lingering!'

If Pharaoh had spoken in his matter-of-fact voice, if the gold mask dangling upside down in his hand had not been such a ridiculous sight, his guards might have carried out his orders on the spot. As it was, the guards heard the words Pharaoh uttered, but the words seemed to them to mean 'My power is breaking, save me, save me!' The guards had no idea how to go

about such a task, so they remained absolutely still and pretended to have heard nothing, as they were trained to do on such occasions of public ceremony, and awaited clearer orders.

But whatever Pharaoh had said, and however he had said it, the new believers were not intimidated. They said: 'We will not choose you in preference to the signs that have become clear to us. We will not choose you in preference to Him who created us. Decide whatever you care to, your decisions count only in this our present life. We believe in our Lord, so that He may forgive us our sins, and the sorcery you obliged us to practise. What is with God is better and everlasting.'

Pharaoh clenched his fists, put on his mask, and ordered his bodyguards and porters: 'Take us to the palace!'

Once inside the palace walls, Pharaoh rushed to his treasure-room to be alone, to find some comfort, to think.

13

The tyrant assesses his power

In the security of his treasure-room, Pharaoh reflected on the foolishness of everyone except himself: 'What fools they are!' His innermost wish was to massacre all the believers, Israelite or Egyptian. But he was a shrewd and practised ruler. He had enemies among the conquered peoples of the Nile valley. He could not be sure for the moment who or how many among the nobles of his court were dithering or, like his sorcerers, already believed. There might be plots hatching even as he spoke. 'Corruption in my kingdom!' he exclaimed to the objects around him. He needed time to weigh up the situation.

Of his battle-plan against the Messenger of God, there still remained two stages: to increase the misery of the Israelites, then to send in his armies against them, wipe out all of their menfolk and so terminate their race. But would persecution of the Israelites unite or divide his own people? He had to know how many had been persuaded by the outcome of the contest. 'Bring Haman to my council chamber,' he called to a guard. He stroked his treasures: 'You are persuasion in abundance! In you I believe, and in myself!'

On the way to his council chamber, he calculated how many hearts and minds he could buy, should he need

to. He happened to glance into his queen's private room as he passed by and saw that she was praying to God.

Pharaoh's heart filled with such hate and disgust, his skin shivered. The woman who had been his loved companion for so many years, whom he had embraced, he now desired to crush under his foot as he would crush a scorpion or other pest. That is God's decree against the proud and arrogant: only what is foul seems to them fair, only what is wrong seems to them right, only what is evil seems to them good. The purity of faith that gave his wife the courage to pray to God in the very house of God's enemy, these were qualities invisible to Pharaoh. Nor did he realize that God protected her from his power. He said to himself: 'If I do not destroy you, it is only so that others may not discover the reason. What! should Pharaoh make Pharaoh's queen an example for those who would believe!' The tyrant, who thought himself so clever, had not the sense to see that God had already honoured her as just such an example. But he was not among those who would believe.

The first command Pharaoh gave to Haman was that the Israelites' places of worship be destroyed: he would no longer tolerate the worship of God in his kingdom. Then, the two men began devising and plotting. They went through the names of those they were sure of. They agreed that the remainder must be sounded out.

The following day, nobles and councillors were gathered. Pharaoh appeared to them, unmasked, relaxed and open, inviting counsel. He said: 'Let me kill Moses, and let Moses call upon his Lord. I fear he may change your religion and cause corruption, disorder and division, in the kingdom.'

A man, who kept his belief hidden, said: 'Why kill a man just for saying "My Lord is God"? If he is lying, the lie is on his own head. If he is truthful, what he promises will strike you down.' As Pharaoh seemed inclined to listen, the man went on: 'Today the kingdom is yours, you have power and authority in the land. But who will help us against the might of God, if it comes upon us?'

Pharaoh and Haman exchanged knowing looks. The man was plainly a believer. Pharaoh encouraged him in order to find out who, among the assembly, would take his side. With great effort he managed to sound confused and humble, like one who has always done his best for others but has been misunderstood, unappreciated: 'I would have you see things as I myself see them. I guide you only on the path of right action.'

The believing man knew that the path the king followed could only lead them all to destruction, but he had the wisdom to speak gently. He avoided provoking Pharaoh to anger, since a man in a rage cannot understand anything. He said: 'I fear for you the like of the day of disaster of the Confederates.' Then,

speaking compassionately and not threateningly, he explained how the believers were parted from the unbelievers in the time of the Prophets Noah, Hood and Salih, and how the unbelievers had finally met with destruction. He reminded them also of the Prophet Joseph, and how, after he died, their forefathers had regretted not learning from him while he was amongst them.

Again Pharaoh and Haman exchanged looks. Neither of them believed in Moses or the God of Moses, indeed they did not believe in anything at all. It was the moment to test the others. Pharaoh said: 'Haman, build me a tower so I can reach the ropes of the heavens and look at Moses' God, for I think Moses is a liar.' Haman laughed at this, as he was supposed to. All the assembled men of wealth and power joined in. The believer knew he was exposed, and alone.

Still he did not curse them. He was afraid for them, not of them. He appealed to them to follow him and be guided to the Straight Path. He appealed to them to think less of the passing enjoyments of this life, and prepare for the lasting abode in the life to come. He reminded them that, in the life to come, an evil deed is recompensed only by its own like, but a good deed is rewarded many times, indeed without measure: the more reason for them to seek forgiveness.

Some there advised him to be sensible and return to their gods. He said: 'O my people, how is it that I call

you to deliverance while you call me to the Fire?’ He urged them to think; what authority did they have for their gods except habit founded on hearsay and guesswork? ‘There is no doubt that it is to God we return, and those who commit grave sins dwell in the Fire.’

The man had hoped that Pharaoh might be guided. He now expected that he would order his instant execution. Neither happened. He said sadly, as he left the assembly: ‘You will remember what I say to you. I commit my affair to God. Assuredly God sees His servants.’

Only Haman understood why Pharaoh had not ordered the man’s death. To do so at that time would only enhance the glory of Moses’ religion; there would be opportunity enough later to deal with such people. Neither Pharaoh nor Haman had any understanding of how well their plotting served God’s purpose.

The others in Pharaoh’s council did not follow their ruler’s line of thinking. They asked, astonished: ‘Will you leave Moses and his people to cause disorder and division in the land, to leave you and your gods?’ Looking one step ahead to his final solution, their king assured them: ‘No, but we shall slaughter all their sons and spare only their women. Without doubt, we have power over them!’

14

The Prophet prays for his people

Pharaoh ordered the persecution of the Israelites to be increased. The menfolk were moved to new work-camps far from the city. There they were made to work harder for longer hours and shorter rations. He encouraged his guards and all his people to be insulting towards the women and children of the Israelites when they came into the city to work, and when they left to return to their settlements, now empty of men except for the lame and the handicapped. Pharaoh had already commanded that the guards tear down the Israelites' places of worship. He now ordered them to enter their settlements at will to terrify and bully them.

In this way Pharaoh made clear to the Egyptians that Moses was powerless to defend his people. At the same time, he distributed grains and other food among the lower ranks of his followers, so it would be seen that they had more, while the followers of Moses had less, than before. Haman encouraged songs in praise of Pharaoh as the bountiful lord of the Nile who gave so much to his people.

The Israelites came to their leader, weak and broken by their sufferings. Moses told them to make their houses a place for prayer since public prayer was

prevented by Pharaoh's guards. He prayed for them and with them and amongst them with all the compassion of his great soul, and as God willed, heartened and sustained them with his faith and hope. He said: 'Pray to God for help from Him. Be steadfast. Assuredly the earth belongs to Him and He lets it pass to whom He wills of His servants. The final victory belongs to those who fear God.'

But, his people said to Moses: 'We suffered before you came to us, and after you came to us.' They were not grateful to have God's Messenger with them. Moses understood that faith was not yet strong among most of his people. He asked himself, as he had before, during the years in Midian, how they would act if they were free, if they had the upper hand. He said: 'It may be that your Lord will destroy your enemy, and make you successors in the land, so that He may witness how you will do.'

Moses had no soldiers, no bowmen, no cavalry or charioteers. His strength was in his believing and his surrendering to God. As God willed, his people would be forgiven their weaknesses and relieved of their distress and would triumph over their enemies. He did not want for them Pharaoh's plenty or Pharaoh's power: he prayed rather for what was best for their souls.

15

God sends many signs to the people of Egypt

The whole creation is God's gift to mankind and for mankind to determine how they earn for their souls. Likewise, the whole creation is God's army against mankind if He wills to turn it against them. Thus God brought upon the people of Pharaoh a time of scarcity and poor harvests. He withheld some of the rains that feed the Nile, and the waters in Pharaoh's canals dried up, and he failed to provide the abundance for his people that he had boasted. Perhaps the people might have remembered their Lord and turned to Him, repenting. But they did not. When all had been well, the Egyptians had taken the credit for themselves, boasting that, unlike other peoples, they were clever and energetic, and organized, and had the latest technology. Now that all was not well, they could find no fault in themselves, but blamed Moses and his people.

Pharaoh's spies told him how certain of the great landlords and nobles of Egypt went in secret to Moses and said: 'Moses, pray to your Lord on our behalf by the promise He has made with you. If you turn from us His anger, we will surely be believers with you, and set you free with the Israelites.' But when God's anger

was removed from them for a time, they broke their word. Pharaoh was delighted with that, and content that, in public, his people would say to Moses only this: 'Whatever sign you bring us, to cast your sorcery on us, we will not believe you.'

Indeed God sent many signs for the people of Egypt, so that they could see, without doubt, that Pharaoh was not the bountiful lord of the Nile he claimed to be, that their well-being, in this world as well as the next, was not with Pharaoh but with the One God by whose leave Moses had said to their king: 'Pharaoh, I am a Messenger from the Lord of all being, worthy to speak of Him nothing except the truth. I have come with a clear sign from your Lord; so, set free with me the Children of Israel.'

After the period of scarcity, God sent a flood which ruined most of the Egyptians' crops and fruits. But they did not reform. After the flood, God sent a plague of locusts. The Egyptians tried fire, then nets, but they could not hold the locusts back from their planted fields and trees. The locusts were very numerous and bred, it seemed to them, in the very crops and fruits they sought to protect. Pharaoh and his armies were powerless, all the cunning of his ministers, his planners, his engineers and architects, was to no avail. But Pharaoh's people were proud and arrogant as before.

After the locusts, God sent lice which infected the Egyptians' heads and hair, their clothes, their beds,

their kitchens, until they were exhausted of scrubbing themselves with scented wood and covering themselves with ointments which brought no relief. And still they blamed not themselves but Moses and the Israelites for putting spells on them. Then, when they were inclined to believe and the anger was lifted from them, they rebelled against themselves and defied God. In this way they proved that their hearts were not inclined to belief but to wrong-doing.

16

His treasures are no comfort to the tyrant

As for Pharaoh, his mood was sour. Often his people had come to him pleading with him to destroy the Israelites or expel them from the land. But, as God willed, Pharaoh was intent on his battle-plan to discredit the Messenger and the Message. He could not now expel the Israelites. Since he had refused to free them, they would claim their expulsion as a victory and then, he imagined, would gather against him all the peoples he had conquered. He would not destroy them either. He desired first that the Israelites should come to him for mercy. Then he would destroy them.

He did not realize that the believers were able to endure and resist his persecution because what they believed was true and God helped them. He thought they denied him out of some senseless spite, or because they wanted to steal power from him, and so take for themselves his treasures.

Pharaoh gazed at his beloved treasures, arranged and displayed for his pleasure. Suddenly, he heard a faint noise. His skin shivered uneasily. There it was again! It was coming from behind his gold mask, the crown and symbol of power, his own face when young. He removed the mask and saw, sitting there, quite uncon-

cerned by the supposed glory of where he was sitting, a tiny green frog, no bigger than his thumb. 'What!' bellowed Pharaoh. 'Rivvit!' answered the frog. Pharaoh swiped at the frog with his mask, but it hopped aside and sat on another priceless object. 'Rivvit!' the frog said again. 'I shall not be mocked!' cried the king and hurled one after another of his treasures at the frog. Each time the frog nimbly hopped aside, and Pharaoh became more and more angry.

A guard, hearing the disturbance, rushed in and with a single, deft movement speared the frog dead. The tyrant was about to reward the guard when another voice called out: 'Rivvit!' and was joined by more and more voices, until the whole room echoed with the same insulting syllables. Pharaoh yelled for his guards and cursed while they rushed about trying to catch the tiny green creatures. They knocked into Pharaoh's most precious things, slipping and slithering over the frogs they had squashed. In the end, there was no solution but to put the treasures away in crates. But even so, the crates had to be emptied and filled many times because the tiny frogs were so nimble and kept getting in.

The whole palace was infested with the frogs. They even found their way into Pharaoh's bed and his wardrobe. He could no longer look in peace at his collection of beautiful, expensive things. He could not walk in peace in his own garden. His armies were of little use to him, they could not even assure him of

privacy. He had the feeling, wherever he went of being watched and laughed at. Only by closing all the doors and boarding up the vents was Pharaoh able to keep the frogs out of a few of his rooms. But these rooms were now very dark. The great ruler who had been called 'the bright star of Egypt' lived in darkness and worked by torchlight in the middle of the day.

In war an experienced general knows when he has lost the initiative and is being forced to fight where he has no wish to, so that retreat is the better option. Pharaoh knew that he was not at this moment in control of events. It did not surprise him that many of his most senior councillors and trusted nobles, the ones who had big houses, little pools and canals in their gardens, reported the same problem. They had coped with the time of scarcity, with the flood, the locusts, even the lice, but the frogs seemed to be driving them mad.

They felt that creation was mocking them. A fine table would be prepared, on would come the food and drink, all would sit down eager to get their banquet under way, and then the voices began: 'Rivvit! Rivvit!' They would try to ignore the voices, but then the frogs would come jumping from one platter onto another, hopping from glass to glass, jug to jug, jug to lap, lap to head, head to neck, then ears, nose, eyes, then there would be screaming madness and chaos!

The horror stories that each had to tell were told and re-told until Pharaoh grew impatient. He asked when

the frogs had been first sighted, and where and by whom. It seemed that in almost every case the nobles' servants had been the first to report them. Pharaoh waited for them to draw the conclusion that the servants must have brought them; how else could there be so many all at once? When they had all agreed to blame the Israelites for this fresh sorcery, he ordered that the Israelites' women and children, their lame and handicapped, be herded together and taken to the work-camps with their menfolk, there to work alongside them. 'Let them taste the whip and the truncheon and the heavy load,' said the king.

The Egyptians wondered if the frogs would go away and how they would manage without unpaid servants. Pharaoh said threateningly: 'Am I not your lord?' His nobles greeted him dutifully as their lord most high, and left bowing and scraping.

But some of them went in secret to the work-camps to see Moses, and as before begged him to pray for them and turn God's anger from them. They promised that they would be believers and that they would set free his people.

17

Another sign, but the Egyptians learn nothing

It was terrible for the women and children of the Israelites to work under the whips of Pharaoh's taskmasters. But they tried to take comfort in that they were together, and God's Messenger encouraged them to be steadfast and trust in God. They said: 'In God we have put our trust. Our Lord, do not make us a temptation for the evil-doers, and save us through Your Mercy from the unbelievers.'

Pharaoh's people were not true to their word. After the frogs had left their houses, they acted as before and wronged themselves.

God then sent for them a fifth sign, a last chance for them to take heed. The flood, the locusts, the lice, the frogs, all these had been visible signs outside themselves. But the fifth was inside them: the blood in their veins rebelled against their bodies, just as they rebelled against their Creator. With some, it flowed after they had cut themselves and would not stop, or only a little, and then begin again. With others, the blood burst within them so that their skin swelled and discoloured. With others, it pounded in their heads until they thought they must go mad, and then it seeped out of their eyes or their noses or their ears. Sometimes they

would be eating and their mouths would suddenly fill with blood. Sometimes their blood would seem to boil and they would suffer terrible fevers. Some households would not be affected at all, while their neighbours were. Then the neighbours would be relieved while the others were affected.

They could make no sense of it. A few were shameless enough to again go to Moses and ask him to pray for their relief. But it was in secret that they went, not openly as believers. They were not guided. Their faces showed that they knew they were making false promises. Then Pharaoh's council came together and appealed to him to relieve them. In despair, some of those who had once been so insolent, now asked their king if he would make peace with God's Messenger. Pharaoh asked them if they would give up power and authority in the land, if they would betray their forefathers and the ways of their forefathers and hand over their lives and possessions to the Israelites. But that was not what they wanted at all, and they again became proud and arrogant. Pharaoh said: 'I do not know that you have any god but me.' Thereafter he assembled his captains and held a council of war.

18

Moses abandons the Egyptians to their fate

God's Messenger accepted in his heart that he must hope no longer that Pharaoh and his people would be guided to the Truth. He accepted that only those are guided whom God guides, and those who are not guided by God have no sure way at all. God had given Pharaoh and his people every manner of privilege, and He had sent them a Messenger and clear signs, but they remained thankless. Moses said: 'Our Lord, You have given adornment and possessions in this life to Pharaoh and his councillors. Our Lord, now leave them to go astray from Your Path. Our Lord, remove all trace of their possessions from them, and leave their hearts to harden so that they never do believe until the terrible punishment is visible to them.'

No reason remained for the Israelites to suffer further persecution in Egypt, so, God said to Moses: 'Your prayer is answered. Go straight, and do not follow the path of those who do not know true religion.'

God also said to Moses: 'Go with the believers, My servants, by night. You will certainly be pursued.'

Moses called his people together and organized them into groups according to their descent from the twelve sons of the Prophet Jacob, upon him be peace, and

appointed a leader for each. He urged them to be steadfast and trust themselves to God. Under cover of darkness he led them out of the work-camps in the direction of Midian. The Israelites were afraid and complained of the danger, but they obeyed.

Though a few of the sentries at the work-camps saw them leave, because they were tired of their duties or for whatever reason God willed, they did nothing to stop them. They pretended they did not see. They would have done better to join with the believers and assist them. When in the morning Pharaoh's officers saw what had happened, they were angry and dismayed. Some horsemen were sent after the Israelites to see where they would go. Others were sent to the city to report to their superiors.

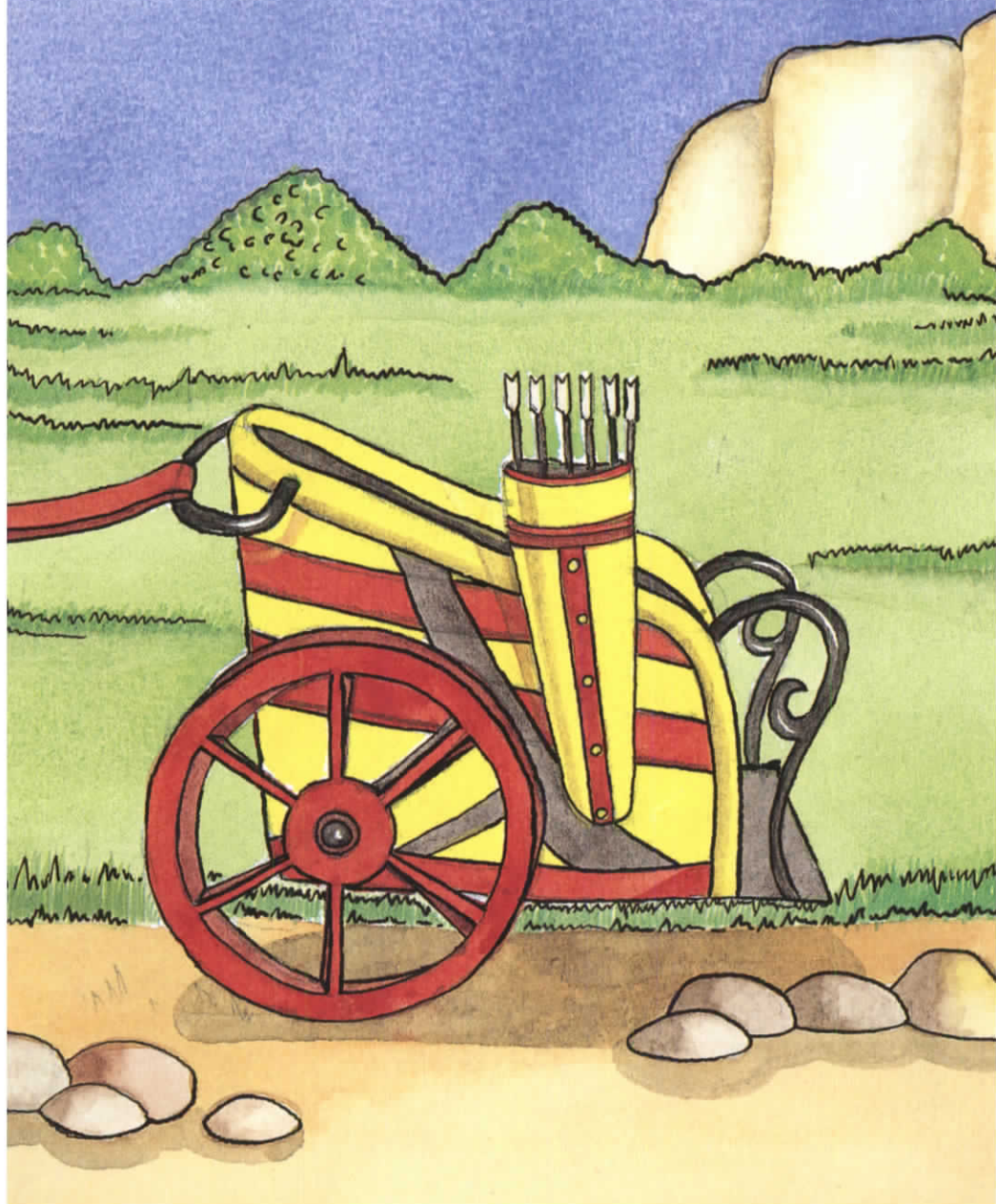
19

The Israelites are pursued by Pharaoh's army

Pharaoh angrily demanded an explanation from his officers at the camps. They said they had posted sentries as always, but the sentries had said they had seen nothing. 'Surely', suggested the officers, 'the sorcery of the Israelites is to blame.'

Then the king ordered his servants to prepare his armour and his chariot, and ordered his captains to gather his army. He realized that his original battle-plan had broken down. He had proved powerless to discredit the Messenger of God or His Message. The only thing that was in his power was to get rid of the Israelites for good. Then, he thought to himself, surely the Message will be discredited, unworthy of belief, if the people who proclaim it are destroyed? I shall certainly prove the victor! In this way, Pharaoh, as ever, deceived himself.

The horsemen returned from their pursuit of the Israelites and reported to the king: 'The Israelites are moving slowly, and complaining at every step. Hunger and weakness are making their progress heavy. In the night they set off towards the land border with Midian, but for reasons we can make no sense of, they turned south in the darkness and seem to be heading toward the sea.'



‘Good!’ said Pharaoh. ‘Then we have time to gather all the army. Let them go where they seem to be going. What, will they walk on the water? No, they have no escape. The day shall be ours and we shall be rid of Moses and his people and his religion. Send for all my soldiers, from every place and every front, to immediately chase after the Israelites. We shall follow later with the chariots and cavalry.’

The king’s captains were puzzled. It seemed to them unwise to send the entire army to one place, it made no military sense. The Israelites would be trapped against the sea, with the army behind them: there was no need for the whole army to go after them. But Pharaoh was not thinking at this moment like a professional soldier. His mind was fixed on his old battle-plan. He wanted to fill the horizon with his power, his foot-soldiers, bowmen, horsemen, charioteers, and so overwhelm the hearts and minds of the believers. Then, surely they would be forced to call on him for mercy as if to their lord most high. Then he would massacre them. To his puzzled captains, Pharaoh said: ‘You have endured with patience the insults and ingratitude of the Israelites, you have battled with honour against their tricks and spells. Now you shall have your reward. There by the sea you shall see justice, those evil-doers, those corrupters of the land, shall perish! Ah, my people, I would not deny even the least of you a share in this day. So let all come, all my mighty army!’ With loud cheers the

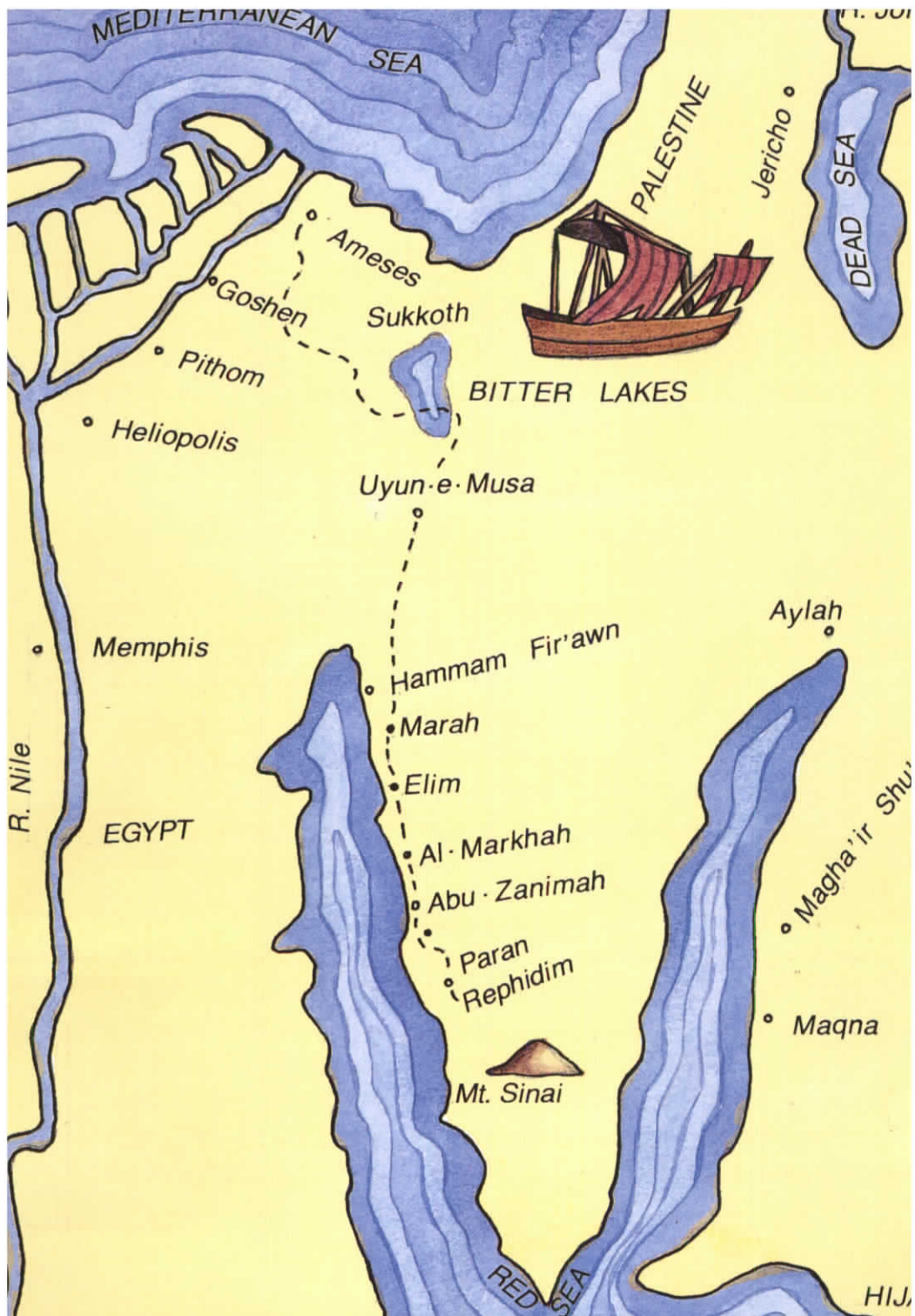
captains and nobles hailed their king and summoned, from every corner of the kingdom, the whole army, exactly as he commanded them.

20

The Israelites walk in fear

All this time, the Israelites walked on, looking back again and again for signs of pursuit. Moses soon realized that he was not following the route to Midian that he knew. During the night, in their fearful and hasty departure they must have turned south. However, there was no way for them but to the east, and Moses led them in that direction. There was terror among the people when, in the early hours of the morning, Pharaoh's horsemen were seen on the horizon, and relief when the horsemen turned back. Many believed that Pharaoh had let them go, and they were heartened. But God had told Moses that they would be pursued. He remained vigilant and prayed at every step for God to sustain and deliver his people, even though they were ungrateful and complaining.

Then, on the far horizon, the Israelites saw a cloud of dust. It was the tyrant's infantry. The believers were terrified. Some, with ears to the ground, listened and heard the regular tramp of Pharaoh's soldiers and the beat of their swords against their shields as they marched. Panic spread among the people, but Aaron and Moses calmed them and assured them of God's promise to those who are steadfast, and the people



rallied and tried to walk faster. Children were carried, the old and the lame were supported, none would be left behind. They moved as quickly as they could, but the cloud of dust moved quicker.

When they could march no more, Moses ordered a rest. They looked back and saw that the cloud of dust had stopped, it was not coming nearer. They listened but heard no sound of marching feet. There was rejoicing amongst them; the pursuing army had stopped, perhaps it would turn back and let them go in peace. But God's Messenger knew from God that his people would be pursued. He commanded them to put their trust in God rather than the whims of Pharaoh. Then, those who listened heard a more fearful rumbling, distant but growing louder. They did not know, but it was Pharaoh's chariots and cavalry arriving to meet up with his infantry. Moses called his people to continue their march.

A range of hills were ahead of them and they rested again before they attempted the pass. From there they saw the cloud of dust approaching again. Those who knew how to do so, listened attentively: a mighty roar was coming nearer from behind them. Others said it was ahead of them. Again God's Messenger called on them to be steadfast, and they climbed the hill. As they climbed they looked back and saw, for the first time, Pharaoh's great army, though from such a distance they could not know how great. Some of the Israelites wanted to surrender. They said it made little difference

whether they died here or at a distance of half a day's walk. Moses urged them to have faith and put their trust in God. They climbed on, and their pursuers drew nearer at a steady pace.

21

The final sign: the drowned army

What fear and horror greeted those who reached the top of the pass first! They saw that what lay before them was not some way of escape but the sea. Then Moses was accused and blamed. His people were ungrateful. They said they wished they had stayed in Pharaoh's work-camps, where they suffered but at least were alive. Here they would be butchered or drown like rats. God's Messenger was compassionate, he endured and did not return their insults. He urged them to accept what God granted to them: the final victory is for those who fear God. The Israelites laboured down the hill and along the lower ridges, toward the sea.

Pharaoh, relishing what he believed to be his hour of triumph, ordered his foot-soldiers to spread out along the ridges of the hill while he led his cavalry and chariots through the pass. Again his captains were astonished by this command. There was no military necessity for it. But Pharaoh was determined on his battle-plan. He would fill the horizon with his power. And indeed, when the Israelites looked back the way they had come, they saw the horizon filled with the might of their enemy bearing down, and before them, barring the way, was the sea. 'We are a destroyed

people!' they cried. 'O son of 'Imran, why have you brought us to this place to die like cornered rats?' The two peoples faced each other, one triumphant, the other trapped. The companions of the Messenger of God said: 'We are overtaken.' But Moses' faith and trust in God was unshaken. He said to them: 'No indeed! For certainly my Lord is with me. He will guide me.'

Then God ordered Moses: 'Strike the sea with your staff!' It was the same staff of which Moses had said in thankfulness, 'I lean upon it and I use it to beat down leaves to feed my sheep, and I have other uses in it.' Moses struck the sea and its waters divided, rising like a mountain on either side. The believers gave thanks to God and passed between the walls of water towering above them.

Pharaoh commanded his armies to ride and march faster. But they reached the sea only after the Israelites had crossed safely to the other side. Pharaoh walked to the water and struck it with a spear again and again. Then he collected himself and said to his army: 'Your lord has commanded the waters to remain thus, so that you may pursue your enemy and destroy them. Follow!' Then in the midst of his horsemen and bowmen, infantry and charioteers, the tyrant rode down between the waters which were still holding back on either side. His followers were reassured. They were proud and confident.

Looking back at the pursuing army, the Israelites were again afraid and complained, but God revealed to Moses: 'They are a drowned army.'

Then, the waters closed on the tyrant's great army.

What gorgeous abundance of fields and orchards, palaces and gardens, fountains and canals, great cities and market-places teeming with goods and people, were separated that day from their owners! Their pride and insolence did not save them. They had wronged themselves beyond all hope of changing for the better. They had broken their word with the believers many times, and defied the signs of God. They had mocked God's Messenger, even though he had demanded none of their possessions from them, nor urged them except to their own salvation.

As the waters closed around him, Pharaoh said: 'I believe that there is no god except the One in whom the Israelites believe, and I am one of those who surrender and believe.' He had not repented when the clear signs came to him: This feeble clinging to life as death overtook him could not be accepted as repentance. Pharaoh, even as he spoke the words of repentance, was pleading to have his life to live over again, and he knew, as a promise-breaker knows when he is making a false promise, that he would live much as he had lived before. So Pharaoh was answered: 'Now? When you rebelled before and were one of the corrupters?'

Not for his tyranny alone, nor for his injustice and greed, terrible though these crimes were, but for his corrupting the hearts of the people, his preventing them from turning to God, and his persecution of the believers, for these greater crimes, Pharaoh's destruction was made a sign for all mankind. His body, rejected by the waters of the sea, was cast up on the shore. None could doubt his end, none of those who were superstitious and weak of faith could pretend that Pharaoh had not perished. He had perished, and all his works with him, and all his power with him, and perished utterly.

And, though she was the one closest of all to Pharaoh the tyrant, his queen had, over the years, become a believer. She had experienced great joy when Moses had come to her floating in a wooden box on the Nile. Again, the day Moses faced the sorcerers alone in the square and emerged from the contest triumphant, pride and understanding had stirred in her heart. And later, in her private room in Pharaoh's palace she had prayed to God: 'My Lord, build me a house in Your Presence in Paradise, and save me from Pharaoh and his deeds, and save me from the unjust people'.

22

The Prophet and his people

The Israelites were, by the will of God, relieved of the fear of Pharaoh. They had themselves witnessed his end. But soon many of them forgot their deliverance. They forgot their old sufferings and complained of their new sufferings. They came, like whining children, and spoke ungratefully to God's Messenger. They said here the sun was too hot for them, and indeed it was hot. They said that they were hungry, and indeed there was little food for them. They said that they were thirsty, and indeed there was no water for them in the barren lands through which they passed. In Egypt they had been treated like work-animals but, they said, at least they had been fed and watered, at least the weather had been less severe. Moses was, on account of his people, ashamed before God, who had sent His Messenger to guide them, who had preferred them above the unbelievers and delivered them from their power. Years of enslavement had weakened the Israelites. They did not have the minds of free men. Years of living amidst unbelievers had weakened their faith, so that they had the tastes and desires of those who had had power over them.

During the years of wandering that followed, Moses endured many trials of his spirit for the perfection of

God's decree upon him and upon the Israelites. He never ceased to praise and thank God, and God sustained him and his people with many miracles. He never ceased to pray for his people, that God guide them on the Straight Path, and that He would not take them to task for the sins of some of them. And indeed for the sake of Moses and for the sake of the firm believers among them, God did turn to the Israelites. But that is another story!

Peace be upon Moses for his trust in God, and for his compassion, and for his care of his people.

And praise be to the Lord of all being.